

Reading Ancient Greek Coins

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Perhaps one reason for the comparatively small interest in Greek coins in the country is the difficulty of understanding their inscriptions. This difficulty is not as great as might be supposed... (Pennington, 1)

MODERN AMERICAN COINS are required by law to include quite a lot of text ^[1].



For example, the obverse (“heads”) of the current half dollar has 23 characters of inscription, and the reverse (“tails”) bears an incredible 44 characters. The current British 10 pence coin bears 22 characters on the obverse and just eight (spelling out the denomination: “TEN PENCE”) on the reverse.

In contrast, ancient Greek coins are remarkably laconic^[2].

Many bear no inscription at all — the technical numismatic term for this (from Greek, of course!) is “anepigraphic”. We can only guess at the level of literacy in the ancient Greek-speaking world. By one estimate, about five to 10 percent of the adult male population could read and write (Harris, 114). Several non-Greek societies (Celtic, Semitic, and Persian) used Greek letters for their coin inscriptions. Ancient Greek coin inscriptions are all written in “capital” letters; lower case letters were a post-Classical development used mainly in manuscripts^[3]. There were usually no spaces between words.

Phanes

ΦΑΝΟΣ ΕΜΙ ΣΗΜΑ



IONIA, Ephesos. Phanes. Circa 625-600 BCE. EL Stater (20.5mm, 14.08 g). Stag grazing right, its dappled coat indicated by indentations on the body; ΦΑΝΟΣ ΕΜΙ ΣΗΜΑ (retrograde) above / Two incuse squares flanking central incuse rectangle, each with raised intersecting lines within. Weidauer 39 = Kastner, Phanes 1 = ACGC 1 = GPCG pl. 1, 9 = BMC 1 (same die and punches); Linzalone LN1074 = Gorny & Mosch 185, lot 146 (same die and punches); Zhuyuetang 7 = Tkalec (29 February 2000), lot 114. Toned. VF. Extremely rare and important. **Triton XXIII** Auction date: 14 January 2020. Lot number: 350

Price realized: 75,000 USD Image: Classical Numismatics Group.

The earliest inscription on a Greek coin dates from about 600 BCE on an electrum **stater** (about 14 grams) of **Ephesus** in **Asia Minor**. A grazing stag adorns the oblong coin below the words, in archaic Greek characters: **ΦΑΝΟΣ ΕΜΙ ΣΗΜΑ** (FANOS EMI SEMA) – “I am the badge of Phanes.” On **Harlan J. Berk’s** list of the *100 Greatest Ancient Coins*, this rare piece is #61 (Berk, 18).

We have no idea who **Phanes** was.

This enigmatic coin is a “speaking artifact” – an ancient inscribed object that refers to itself. The most famous speaking artifact is the “**Cup of Nestor**”^[4], an eighth-century BCE wine cup found in 1954, bearing one of the earliest known inscriptions in the Greek language. The three-line inscription begins: “I am the cup of Nestor, good for drinking.” Both the coin and the cup inscriptions are “retrograde” – reading from right to left. Greeks borrowed their alphabet from the **Phoenicians**, who wrote from right to left like the **Hebrews**. Only later did the Greeks settle on reading from left to right, as we do today in English.

As far as I know, no other ancient coins refer to themselves as if they were talking.

Corinth & Athens



Corinth Stater circa 345-307, AR 21 mm, 8.04 g. Pegasus flying l.; below, [koppa]. Rev. Helmeted head of Athena l., wearing necklace; Γ before and behind the head, dove l. within wreath. Ravel 1029. Calciati, Pegasi 419. Numismatica Ars Classica > Spring Sale 2020, 25 May 2020, Lot: 224, realized: 600 CHF (Approx. 618 USD).

Silver staters of **Corinth** often bear only a single letter, the obsolete letter *qoppa*: **Q**, in the field below the image of **Pegasus**, abbreviating the “ethnic” that identifies the people who made the coin: “of the Corinthians”.



Attica, Athens Tetradrachm After 449, AR 24mm., 17.18g. Head of Athena r., wearing Attic helmet decorated with olive leaves and palmette. Rev. Owl standing r.; in l. field, olive sprig, and crescent. All within incuse square. Svoronos pl. XII. SNG Copenhagen 36. Naville Numismatics Ltd. > Auction 59, 26 July 2020, Lot: 152, realized: 420 GBP (approx. 537 USD).

The famous “owl” coins of **Athens** bear just three letters **ΑΘΕ** abbreviating *Athenaion* “the Athenians”. In the classical era, common Greek practice was to identify coins not by the place but by the population.

Eucratides & Philistis



Greco-Baktrian Kingdom. Eukratides I Megasthenes. Circa 170-145 BCE. AR Tetradrachm (33mm, 16.81 g, 12h). Diademed and draped bust right / The Dioskouroi on horses rearing right, holding palms and spears; monogram to right. Bopearachchi 1B; HGC 12, 130. Toned, light circulation marks, scratches under tone on reverse. VF. **Classical Numismatic Group** > **Electronic Auction 469**. 3 June 2020, Lot: 186, realized: 900 USD.

One of the most common words you will see on an ancient Greek coin is **ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ** (*basileos*, meaning “king”). A handsome example is the silver **tetradrachm**^[5] of the **Bactrian** king **Eucratides**, who ruled c. 175-145 BCE.

More rarely we see the word **ΒΑΣΙΛΙΣΣΑ** (*basilissa*, meaning “queen”). A beautiful example is the silver **16 litra** piece (13.6 grams) of Queen **Philistis**, the wife of **Hiero II** (ruled 270-215 BCE), tyrant of **Syracuse**^[6]. She is known to history only from her coins. Her portrait appears on the obverse, with her name, her title, and a magnificent *quadriga* (four-horse chariot) on the reverse.



SICILY, Syracuse. Philistis, wife of Hieron II. 275-215 BCE. AR 16 Litrai (13.60 g, 11h). Struck circa 216-215 BCE. Diademed and veiled bust left; star to right / BASILISSAS FILISTIDOS, Nike driving galloping quadriga right, holding reins in both hands; star above, K to right. Burnett, Enna 34-36 (same obv. die); SNG ANS 880 (same obv. die); SNG Lloyd 1545; Gulbenkian 354. EF, toned, light mark in the field on reverse. Ex: New York Sale IV (17 January 2002), lot 89. **Classical Numismatic Group** > **Triton X**, 9 January 2007, Lot: 101, realized: 2,600 USD.

Like Latin, German, Russian, and many other Indo-European languages, word endings in Greek indicate their grammatical function. The inscription on this coin, BASILISSAS FILISTIDOS, in the “genitive” (possessive) case means “of queen Philistis”.

Euainetos



SYRACUSE, Dionysius I, 406–367. Decadrachm c. 400 BCE, Attic standard, AR 43.40 g. Work signed by the engraver Euainetos. Obv. Quadriga galloping left, driven by charioteer holding kentron in right hand and reins in left, crowned by Nike flying right; in exergue, suit of defensive armor consisting of a shield, cuirass between two greaves, and helmet. Rev. ΣΥ-ΠΙΑ-Κ-Ο-ΣΙΩΝ / EY-AINE Head of the nymph Arethusa left, crowned with reed-wreath, wearing triple-drop earring and necklace; around, four dolphins; border of dots. Numismatica Ars Classica > Auction 74, 18 November 2013, Lot: 281, realized: 400,000 CHF (approx. 438,596 USD).

The massive (43.4 gram) silver **dekadrachm** of Syracuse struck from dies engraved by the master artisan **Euainetos** is considered by many numismatists to be the most beautiful of all classical Greek coins. On Harlan Berk's list of the *100 Greatest Ancient Coins*, this type is #3 (Berk, 44).

Some of the coin dies engraved by Euainetos are signed in tiny letters with his name, shortened to **EUAINE** or **EUAINETO**. Other ancient Greek coin engravers who signed their dies include **Kimon**, **Eukleidas**, **Phrygillos**, and some only known by the first few letters of their names^[7]. It is possible that ancient coin engravers – some of whom are known to have also carved gemstones – used rock crystal magnifying lenses in their work.

Get Your Copy of Harlan J. Berk's 100 Greatest Ancient Coins: Second Edition from CoinWeek Supplies.

Writing Dates

Our modern way of expressing historical dates as BCE ("Before the Common Era") or CE ("Common Era") was of course unknown in the ancient world, where a wide variety of reckoning systems were used.

One of the most common was the “**Seleucid Era**”, in which Year 1 corresponds to 312/311 BCE (when **Seleucus I**, one of **Alexander the Great’s** generals, re-occupied **Babylon**).



Kingdom of Pontus, Mithradates VI Eupator AR Tetradrachm. 67/66 BCE. Diademed head right / Pegasos on ground line to left, preparing to lie down, ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ above, ΜΙΘΡΑΔΑΤΟΥ ΕΥΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ below; star within crescent to left, monogram to right, date (year 231) below. De Callataj D77/R1a; Paris, BN, Pont 50 = Waddington 131; Burgan, 30 June 1984, 309. 16.44g, 32mm, 12h. **Roma Numismatics Ltd** > **Auction XI**, 7 April 2016, Lot: 471, realized: 9,000 GBP (Approx. 12,685 USD).

King **Mithradates VI** of **Pontus** dated his coins according to the “Bosporan Era”^[8], which began in 297 BCE. A coin of Mithradates struck in 66/67 BCE is dated Year 231 (ΑΛΣ in Greek numerals)^[9].



ΔΠ = 84

Tiberius. 14-37 CE. Tetradrachm, 14.67g. (12h). Antioch ad Orontem, Seleucis and Pieria, Year 84 = 35/6 CE. Obv: ΤΙΒ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ ΣΕ – ΒΑΣΤΟC Head laureate right, bead and reel border. Rx: ANTIOXEΩN M – H – T – PΟΠΟΛΕΩ (sic, C omitted) around, date ΔΠ in lower right field, Turreted Tyche of Antioch seated right on rocks, holding curving palm branch before her, at her feet river god Orontes swimming right with head facing, border of dots. Reverse legend variant of RPC 4162 (3 specimens), Prieur 61 (4 specimens), and McAlee 210 (“V. Rare”, same obverse die). The engraver omitted the last letter of MHTPOΠΟΛΕΩC for lack of space. **Gemini, LLC Auction IX**, 9 January 2012, Lot: 259, realized: 12,000 USD.

Under the **Roman Empire**, many Greek-speaking cities continued to date their coinage according to their own local eras. A tetradrachm^[10] of **Antioch** issued under **Tiberius** in 35/36 CE, for example, is dated Year 84 (ΔΠ) of the “Caesarian era”, which began in 48 BCE when **Julius Caesar** granted autonomy to the city – one of the few in the Roman East allowed to strike its own silver coinage.

Parthia



KINGS OF PARTHIA. Arsakes XVI, 78/7-62/1 BCE. Tetradrachm (Silver, 32 mm, 15.53 g, 1 h), Seleukeia on the Tigris. Diademed and draped bust of Arsakes XVI to left. Rev. ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ – ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ / ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ – ΘΕΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ / ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ – ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ / ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ Archer (Arsakes I) seated right on throne, holding bow; above bow, monogram. Sellwood 30.2 (unknown king). **Leu Numismatik AG** > **Web Auction 10**, Auction date: 7 December 2019, Lot number: 662, Price realized: 220 CHF (Approx. 223 USD).

The **Parthians**, a Central Asian people who spoke an Iranian language, conquered a large part of the crumbling Seleucid empire beginning in the mid-third century BCE. Parthian coins were inscribed in Greek since many of their subject peoples (who spoke many different tongues) could read the language.

Parthian kings delighted in attaching bombastic epithets to their names. An extreme case is the obscure **Arsakes XVI**, who ruled c. 78 – 61 BCE. On the reverse of his tetradrachm^[11], he is hailed as **ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΑΡΣΑΚΟΥ ΘΕΟΠΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΕΥΕΡΓΕΤΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΦΙΛΕΛΛΗΝΟΣ** (“Great King Arsakes, Son of a God, Benefactor, Manifest Divinity, Friend of the Greeks”). Somehow the engraver managed to make all 60 letters fit!

Judaea



JUDAEA, Procurators. Pontius Pilate. 26-36 CE. Æ Prutah (15mm, 1.64 g, 10h). In the name of Emperor Tiberius. Dated RY 17 of Tiberius (30 CE). TIBEPHOV KAICAPOC, lituus / LIZ (date) within wreath. Meshorer 333; Hendin 1342; RPC 4968. VF, earthen green patina. **Classical Numismatic Group Electronic Auction 313**, 23 October 2013, Lot: 184, realized: 240 USD.

Under Roman rule, small change issued for local use in **Judaea** was inscribed in Greek.

A very popular example is the bronze **prutah** issued by **Pontius Pilate** (procurator, 26-36 CE) in the name of Emperor Tiberius^[12]. The obverse inscription is **TIBEPHOV KAICAPOC** (“of Tiberius Caesar”). The reverse simply reads **LIZ**. This is not a girl’s nickname, but rather a date: Year 17 of Tiberius, corresponding to 30 CE. The letter “L” here is not a regular Greek letter; it is a kind of scribal abbreviation for the word **ETOYC** (“of year”). This commonly appears in the dating formula of Roman provincial coins.

Axum



KINGS of AXUM. Endubis. Circa 270-290 AD. AV Third Aureus (2.73 gm). ENDYBIC BACILEYC, draped bust right flanked by grain ears; crescent and pellet above / AZWMITW BICI DAXY, (of the Axumite man of Dakhu) similar bust. Munro-Hay 1; Anzani 1; BMC Aksumite 1. **Classical Numismatic Group** > **Mail Bid Sale 64**, 24 September 2003, **Lot:** 1243, **realized:** 1,600 USD.

The kingdom of **Axum** in what is now **Ethiopia** was the only African state south of the **Sahara** to issue its own coinage in antiquity. The language of the people was **Ge'ez** (still used as a liturgical language by the **Ethiopian Orthodox Church**), which has its own alphabet, but the coin inscriptions were written in Greek letters.

A gold coin^[13] of King **Endubis** (c. 270-290 CE) is inscribed **ENDYBIC BACILEYC** (*Endubis Basileus*) on the obverse in Greek, and **ΑΞΩΜΙΤΩ ΒΙCΙ ΔΑΧΥ** (*Aksomito Bisi Dakhu*) in Ge'ez.

Greek for Collectors

Coin inscriptions (and possibly makers' signatures on ceramic oil lamps) were the first mass-produced texts (Harris, 14), and they have proven to be a source of important historical evidence.

The modern Greek language uses the same alphabet as ancient Greek but differs significantly in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The ancient language had several distinct dialects: "**Attic**" **Greek** was the prestigious but complex literary language, taught today in many university Classics departments. **Koine Greek**, thought to be close to the speech of the common people, was the language of the **New Testament**, often taught today for Bible studies.

Understanding numismatic Greek, however, is a much simpler matter, since a limited number of words, abbreviations, and formulas appear on coin inscriptions during our nine centuries of interest, c. 600 BCE – 300 CE.

A slim pamphlet published in 1964, *How to Read Greek Coins*, is a helpful reference for beginners with no knowledge of Greek. Used copies can be found online for under \$20.

Rather more advanced is *Greek Numismatic Epigraphy* (1969), which can also readily be found online for under \$20.

There are many excellent textbooks for collectors interested in a deeper dive into the ancient language, I found *Learn Ancient Greek* (1998) particularly enjoyable.

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Notes

[1] LIBERTY, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, E PLURIBUS UNUM, IN GOD WE TRUST, the denomination and the year of issue.

[2] The word “laconic” is derived from **Lakonia**, the region of **Greece** inhabited by the **Spartans**, a people famously sparing with their words.

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_alphabet

[4] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestor's_Cup_\(Pithekoussai\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestor's_Cup_(Pithekoussai))

[5] CNG Electronic Auction 469, June 3, 2020, Lot 186. Realized \$900 USD (estimate 500).

[6] CNG Triton X, January 9, 2007, Lot 101. Realized \$2,600 USD (estimate \$2,000).

[7] <https://www.ngccoin.com/news/article/5527/NGC-Ancient-coins/>

[8] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bosporan_era

[9] Roma Numismatics Auction XI, April 7, 2016, Lot 471. Realized £9,000 (about \$12,685 USD; estimate £5,000).

[10] Gemini IX, January 9, 2012, Lot 259. Realized \$12,000 USD (estimate \$15,000).

[11] Leu Numismatik Web Auction 10, December 7, 2019, Lot 662. Realized CHF 220 (about \$223 USD; estimate CHF 75).

[12] CNG Electronic Auction 313, October 23, 2013, Lot 184. Realized \$240 USD (estimate \$150).

[13] CNG Mail Bid Sale 64, September 24, 2003, Lot 1243, realized \$1,600 USD (estimate \$750).

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